

Confessions of a Skipper

By Capt. Stan Dunlap

Frankly, I feel like hell.
For the past few minutes, I've been sitting here with my thoughts, and I don't seem to like any of them.

You see, when I woke up this morning, I thought right away that it was going to be a fine day. It was Friday, the weekend was ahead, my name was on the flight schedule, and I'd left my "in" basket in good shape the night before. All in all, it was going to be the kind of day that all of us look forward to.

The trip down the interstate wasn't too bad, and the weather looked great for my low level. I should have known it couldn't last.

I'd just finished getting suited up when the XO stuck his head in the door and gave me the news; we'd lost one of our men in a traffic accident. Without being told, I instinctively knew who it must be; yet, I still asked the question. What I was told only confirmed my initial thoughts, and my guilt attack really began.

I'd better back up a bit. I was the XO when this petty officer first checked aboard, and I'd studied his record before I ever met him. Based on performance evaluations and prior duty assignments, I felt we were lucky to get such a talented individual. He had come to us after a rather brief tour as a FRAMP (fleet replacement aviation maintenance program) instructor, and I guess I should have taken the time to ask a few questions, but I didn't. I was so happy to see a man with the skills we so desperately needed that I gave him my stock speech, told him about the upcoming (and overtasked) schedule, then pointed him toward maintenance.

The next few months went by at a gallop, with all the quickie deployments, day-night bounces, carrier quals, buildups, schools, leave, pickup, unpack, move off, move aboard, and the ever-present schedule changes. It seemed there never was enough time for all the necessary evolutions, much less those things I had kept putting off until the pace slacked off just a bit. Through it all, this "new" petty officer seemed to fit right in. Always where he was needed the most, he soon became indispensable.



I guess it was right before we went on cruise that I first noticed a change, but even that statement probably is wrong. Now that I think about it, he was in deep trouble long before I ever knew it. The changes were subtle; he was a real pro at hiding the truth, and he'd been at it a long time. In retrospect, I guess what makes me feel the worst is the fact that numerous other people in many other commands had known the truth about this "exceptional" Sailor but never said or did a thing. They just transferred the problem out the door and out of their lives. In any event, his performance began to take a turn for the worse.

At first, I attributed the change to his failure to make E-7. All of us were shocked when the results came in, but I chalked it up to a momentary problem with a test, sympathized with him about the results, then went back to work—all of us did.

Cruise was just around the corner, and we were behind the curve in several critical areas. If I'd been a little smarter, I could have asked questions about prior civil convictions. We just had received word on the first of several recent citations he had received, and finally the maintenance officer told me that his maintenance-control officer had been covering for this "superior petty officer."

It seems he was habitually late for muster—nothing major, just a few minutes here and there, punctuated by an occasional "alarm clock failure." He never did make any close friends in the squadron, and he lived alone. He'd been married at one time, but no one seemed to know why the marriage had broken up. When he volunteered to stand duty during an all-hands party, we all thought the action was just one more part of a petty officer who truly was superior in all respects. I can add up all these things now, but I never saw them in the proper context at a time when I might have done something.


Cruise was especially eventful for me. I took over as CO, and we brought back the same number of planes and people that we started with. Other than that, it was pretty much the same as always. Oh yes, our exceptional petty officer got loaded a few times in port, but who didn't? We all joked about posting a watch on him, but let's face facts: TacAir types work hard, and they play the same way. We sure can't fault a really hard charger for tying one on every once in a while... or can we?

You can guess the rest. During the post-deployment stand-down, his troubles really began to surface. I even

ran into several old acquaintances who not only knew this man but knew all about his "problem." I even began to get used to seeing his name in the same old places: muster reports, civil-conviction lists, indebtedness letters, and then, where I should have placed it almost a year earlier, on a set of orders to the ARC (Alcohol Rehabilitation Center). By that time, everyone knew that we probably had a full-blown alcoholic on our hands, but we also had the schedule to contend with. There always were more tasks than time, and, on most occasions, it was a lot easier to work around what we felt was "just another personnel problem."

He came back to us from the ARC, and nearly everyone in the squadron avoided him. I guess we all were just embarrassed to discuss alcoholism with him, and, perhaps as a result of this, he withdrew even further. No one ever will know exactly how long he stayed "dry," or if he ever really did at all. I found out for myself that he was drinking again when I was invited to the Acey Deucey Club by the squadron POs. I saw him at the bar with a beer—apart from the rest of us. It was right then and there I confronted him about falling off the wagon. His answer was easy—too easy. It seems the beer was OK; he just had to avoid the hard stuff. I was dubious, but I watched him nurse that beer for more than an hour. After all, the rest of us were laughing and scratching, so why shouldn't he have a good time?

He died that night. The police said he died with enough alcohol in him to make two men legally drunk. In a way, I'm not really sorry he's dead. If a car hadn't done it, the liquor eventually would have, so I can rationalize his loss pretty well. The only thing I'm really having a lot of trouble with is the family of four in the other car. They might have had a future, but not any more. No one could have survived an impact like that one.

Could I have done anything to change all of this? I'll keep telling myself "no," but that won't really help. Frankly, I feel like hell. 

Capt. Stan Dunlap, ComNavAirLant Safety

I'll bet most readers will think this article is a relatively new submission, unless you happen to be familiar with the author, but, friends, you're mistaken. This story first ran in the September 1984 Approach. Although more than 20 years have passed, the potential for a repeat of the events in this story is very much alive yet today.—Ed.